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ABSTRACT

Video is a very new medium; painting a very ancient one. This fact inevitably creates a great difference in the two, but not nearly so great as the confusion of this moment makes it seem. In an effort to reconcile the two media four concerns--naturalism, surface, a respect for the properties of the medium, and motion--appear to be important. These things do not represent goals--these are creation and expressiveness--but they do represent the ways one tries to reach goals. Video has almost no aesthetic history of its own, only the aesthetics of other media. In a sense it's too new for an aesthetic to be formed about it, but any art form that's a living, vibrant art form is always too new for an aesthetic about it to be formed. If it stops being too new, then it's an historical phenomenon and is probably no longer being done. That's true of painting, as well as video. (Author/MC)

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REFLECTIONS ON TWO MEDIA.

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Reflections on Two Media

William Gwin

Video is a very new medium, painting a very ancient one. This fact inevitably creates great difference in the two; but not nearly so great as the confusion of this moment makes it seem. What I hope to do here is to verbalize the sensibilities underpinning my work and to point out a few of the similarities between the two media, or at least between the two ways I have come to use the two media. In this effort I find myself returning to four concerns -- naturalism, surface, a respect for the properties of the medium, and motion. These things do not represent the goals of my work -- these are creation and expressiveness -- but they do represent the ways I have devised to reach those goals.

Naturalism is the context within which I work; it describes the basic attitude from which all my work comes. Naturalism describes a synthesis of memories from the visual world and feelings produced by confrontation between nature within the artist and nature outside the artist and does not depend on any particular observation. Naturalism represents a very different concept from realism, has very little to do with photographic or even nearly photographic representation, and may

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William Gwin is a painter, and was the Center's first artist-in-residence. He is presently in New York City working in both media.

manifest itself in very abstract forms; but there is always a strong reference to a world outside the work, to a world shared, in a general way at least, by all people.

Surface means the visual feel of the work. This notion includes the development of formal relations between various pictorial elements. These relations provide the structuring that allows a work to have the internal integrity that is necessary if it is to have the freedom to be expressive. Colors, shapes, lines, and textures create and combine within some sort of spatial framework to generate the image which carries whatever message the artist might wish to convey.

Motion is either real or implied and is not usually the clearly directed movement of a discrete pictorial element happening in a precise interval of time, but a more general fluttering of the entire field activated at times by currents. The motion of leaves in wind is a close analogy.

Respect for the properties of the material means searching out those qualities within the chosen material which best lend themselves to expressiveness and shaping them by combining them with an intelligence, rather than using the material only as a vehicle for ideas.

Naturalism, surface, motion and a respect for the properties of the material are the four cornerstones on which my art is built. They support the video and the painting, but not always in the same way nor with equal force. By looking at these four ideas and the similarities or differences in the ways

they function within the two forms it should be possible to arrive at a clearer understanding of my work and of the potential for creative expression within these two media.

Since the context provided by my notion of naturalism is a very general one and has to do with basic attitudes, including the ways I respond to the visual world and the place I want my work to take in that world, it has basically the same function in my painting and my video. While the framework alludes to the natural world, the working out of each image is a more formal and involuted matter which deals with the nature of the medium, with color and with textural, linear, and spatial relations rather than with any relationship between the work and the world outside the work.

Surface is the visual feel of the work. Since I've defined this word to include most of what one is looking at when he looks at my work, it might be valuable to see what sort of surface is created, why, and how it is done. Color, texture and discrete pictorial elements, the basic components of surface, are developed by building up interrupted layers. This is achieved in my paintings by applying the paint so a great number of transparent, translucent or opaque layers are produced. In "Irving Bridge", my most recent video work, it is done with layers of videotaped imagery. These layers relate to one another in a very dense and complicated fashion, and are defined basically by color, although shape plays some role as well. These overlapping layers create a sort of shallow, ambiguous space; there is no

use of perspective or other illusionistic devices in the painting and only little in the video, so that very dense images can be created without losing the breathing space which is necessary for the interaction of the various elements within a work. Video has an advantage here because unlike painting, you can move the elements around, get rid of some, substitute others, and keep the surface from becoming clogged. On the other hand, painting has a decided advantage in the fact that the actual surface can be altered; at present, video must be displayed on a glass television screen. The size and shape of a canvas is flexible, but video must always be a 3x4 rectangle, and is most often quite small. Image resolution is also a serious problem in video but no problem in painting. Many of these factors will one day, no doubt, be eliminated or at least relieved by technological advances; but for a time they erect serious, though not insurmountable, blocks in the path of the creation of video art.

The method of working in successive layers has an analogy to the dynamics of the creative process itself. I begin with a notion, and usually have a fairly precise idea of how it might be realised; but I carefully stay prepared to receive feedback from the work as it progresses, or from any other source, so that the final work is a composite of my beginning ideas and many other ideas which might have developed as the work was in progress. It's a non-linear kind of act, capable of shifts,

reversals, and changes when unforeseen possibilities present themselves, appropriate, I think, to the property of non-linearity which can be an aspect of both painting's and video's expressiveness. These potentials are things I'm always interacting with as I work. In the end the work shows the layers of thought and activity which combined to create it.

It's this ability to receive feedback and shift to make use of it that allows the notion of respecting the particular qualities of a medium to play such an important role. Whenever something happens as a result of a combination of whatever materials are being used it's important to be able to see that relationship and to see the possibilities inherent in it and then to build on these possibilities rather than having an idea which is so inflexible that every chance happening deviating from that idea becomes a mistake, something to be done away with. That isn't to say that there is anything sacred about a medium or that every chance relation which develops while a work is in progress is necessarily good; and certainly it does not mean that materials and chance are enough to make a work of art. Whenever something happens that runs contrary to the idea behind the work -- and it frequently does happen -- then that thing must be eliminated or modified. The ideas must always remain the most important things; but good ideas are fairly flexible and can usually accept a lot of change without being violated. The point is that each medium should be approached as a unique possibility rather than as only a

way to carry the aesthetic.

I think things have particular qualities in them, whether they are pieces of wood or pieces of cloth or paint or electronic systems. And some of these things are very, very beautiful. The more completely these things are used the more they can contribute to and increase the overall impact of the work. A videotape of a tree can be made and played back onto a monitor bringing a moving picture of tree into your living room. This uses video as a storage and transmission device, and ignores many possibilities for creative expression. On the other hand, that picture can be made in such a way as to be useful as a compositional element in a video work made by synthesizing form, color, texture, other pictorial elements in motion to produce something that utilizes many more beautiful possibilities inherent within the medium of video.

In television, and in most experimental video, time is structured in a linear, basically filmic fashion. Compositions, even the most abstract, have a beginning, a middle and an end. They have a duration and move linearly through that span. This notion of time creates movement, a very different matter from motion. Motion is created when time is thought of as something other than the interval-measures used to structure the daily flow of peoples' lives, when time is thought of as unrestrained change, rhythm, the turning and exposing another part of the prism to the sun. Motion expresses the kind of time one

experiences with Nature.

Ideally my video pieces would be presented in a loop, running continuously. There would be no beginning, no middle, and no end, and no particular duration, save the length of time a viewer wanted to spend with it in much the same way a person spends time with a painting. I don't want to structure the viewer's experience, to tell someone: if you want to see what I've done you have to come in and sit here for fifteen minutes or an hour, and if you look at it again, you'll be looking at a repeat. The notion of a repeat has no meaning in relation to painting and needn't be a part of a video experience. The work is there and what you see will change to the degree that you're perceptive. I would prefer presenting a work in such a way that it didn't require one to take a particular length of time out of his life and give it to the work, which is what a film does or music in a concert situation does. I would let you move in and out of it in the same way you can move in and out of the things that you see when you're walking in the woods, or sitting by a window, or doing most of the things you do when you're alive. That lets the tape, the work of art, have the same position that any other object has. It's there -- you can look at it, and stop looking at it, and come back to it, and you haven't missed an important point in its development because it's not developing in that way: time is not a deliberately compositional element. It exists in time as you exist in time.

It's of the flow, of that same continuum in which we all exist. It's closer to the kind of time one experiences with Nature, and much less of the intellectual idea we impose on experience to order it, structure it, attempt to control it.

Video's non-linearity does have its other side, which is the danger of sloppiness in the making process. But if the maker has mastery over his craft he can give the viewer a great deal of freedom. Obviously the artist does shape the experience -- red is a very different feeling from blue -- but Nature does that too. Walk into a desert and Nature shapes you in one way. Walk by the ocean and Nature shapes you in another.

The way this concept of time expressed as motion structures video brings this medium much closer to painting than to film. In video motion is real, in painting it is implied; but both can fit into the flow of a person's life in very similar ways. It's like the difference between looking at a rock and water. If you look at a rock the changes you perceive will be internally generated changes initiated by the presence of the rock. The rock is moving but too slowly for the eye to see. Water, on the other hand, moves at an easily perceivable rate so the changes we see when looking at water are both internal and external.

These notions are evolving, because video art itself is evolving. It has almost no aesthetic history of its own, only the aesthetics of other media. In a sense it's too new for

an aesthetic to be formed about it, but any art form that's a living, vibrant art form is always too new for an aesthetic about it to be formed. If it stops being too new, then it's an historical phenomenon and is probably no longer being done. That's true of painting, as well as video.

Dear David,

Something is going on that has to do with the artful arrangement of electronic flow.

We all know about electricity.

It makes our washing machines go. It makes lights turn on. It makes vacuum cleaners work. It activates hair dryers. It gives us radio, television and it opens garage doors. It even makes a new kind of dishwashing possible.

Unfortunately, only God knows what else it might be doing.

I say "unfortunately" -- because until minds closer in kind to philosophers are touched to inquire about it -- only God will know.

I wish we were all more troubled about that.

Anyway --. You know that I am concerned about electricity as the material of a new artful expression of man.

The question I asked myself some years ago: if electricity can do all that other stuff, how come we can't use it to make beauty?

And now I know that we can.

However, in writing these words, I'm many weeks in front of my anticipation.

The fact is, I don't know whether what we're doing tonight

(This is a letter to David Dowe, head of the Dallas Center for Experiments in Television, from National Center director Brice Howard, in preparation for the two organizations' co-production, "An Electric Concert," held in the Bob Hope Theatre at Southern Methodist University last November. It was reprinted in the program for that event.)

-- (words I wrote weeks ago) -- is going to mean anything to anyone who did not participate in its preparation.

This is to be a Performance. That is to say, we will be occupying a common space volume and experiencing one another in our real, passing, common time.

We cannot.

The continuum spirals outward, a stellar flower. Its new petals are always, at least, another perspective on the most ancient of all tribal longings: to know beginnings.

"Let us sup at the first fruit. Let us quiver in the first impulse. Let us wind our grasp in the first flux.

Let us feel together what is in the beginning."

Of course, we cannot.

But, with the Grace of the Pod we may be re-initiated into human being each time we try.

Electromagnetic energy can be our handmaiden. It is our link to the sun.

The divine sparks have been strewn in our midst. They and we are vieing together at the speed of light.

Now, how do we live in humility with such awesome knowledge?

We act in the name of the Creator. And mindful of our history of wayward ways, we accept His gift.

And to honor Him, we make something. This making is our reverent act.

And we offer it as a token of our consciousness. Thus, we affirm our belief in the evolving union of the actual and the possible.

And aspire to wings.

This is the metaphor and the symbol.

With insight, with effort, and with Fate's gift of fortune, we make another model in the spirit of beauty.

We craft our urgency.

And we hope there are others who will be touched by our impossible reach.

Look -- you who read words, hear sounds, see sights --: electricity is a new material with which human consciousness can artfully express itself.

How splendid it could be if we have hinted at this possibility in the performance you are about to experience.

Because movies and television have stimulated truth in moving images -- this whole time-occurrence-place phenomenon has become an extremely complex psychological/aesthetic matter.

In a marvelous way that I'm incapable of describing in a note of this kind, we are all going to make something together. It is our common presence which will make it possible.

Experience teaches us how to live with the actual. Actual, or time remembered, youthful imagination invites us to embrace the possible.

When motivation derived of beauty frees us to reach, we almost always reach toward that we have always aspired to. We are evoked.

Well -- some may feel that is not all the truth. So, -- true it may not be for some.

But, this is surely true: if we care enough, we believe -- even in that which seems impossible.

(And, here we are turning about ambient centers, the location of which have become as vagrant as hope. And so many of them --).

Every day or so (if we are alert) new possibilities invite us. Yet, so deeply are we rutted (and we rut) in experience gained, we hesitate to move.

Birds fly. We invent airplanes. We think we fly.

Not so; only birds fly.

So, what is human?

Human is being. Not been; being.

A new outer edge begins to appear in the slowly perceptible wheeling of the great galaxy of man's accumulations. Evolution is always the verb.

And we are in it.

Something new is emerging.

Only the great God knows.

But, this is clear: a new invitation is being offered. Some new urgency suggests again that we may be verging upon the secret.

Of course we cannot know it.

In closing, a bit of advice: whenever you come upon the gate of the ring modulator, check your capacitance before you pass through. That way your line may be protected from overload.

And when you record visual experience, beware of overdrive. Images do not retain well in magnetic fields that are charged with too much energy.

Light is a magical truth.

Love,
Brice Howard

An Ancient Gift

Brice Howard

Then, we encountered the historical connection: the old Chinese calligraphy. At last the fibre was joined. The long line has been established.

Our inheritance is from this ancient art. Our lineage is clear.

Both in one; fragile and strong.

Poet in drafted spirit.

The connection is, itself, beautiful.

So beautiful the art. And so keen the discipline.

Severe the discipline!

Severe.

And it may be at this juncture that we encounter the hazard of all the hazards. This may be greater than we had anticipated.

Can we submit ourselves to this self-sacrificing task?

Is there one among us who will accept the gift which can be received only by reaching back, by reaching far, far back?

What are these old masters offering?

They are offering intense schooling in craft. They are offering this discipline.

They are offering refined awareness -----; opening out perception through spirit, mind, and body. They are offering this discipline.

They are offering an ancient gateway to natural, organic evolution. They are offering connections between plant, animal, bird, fish, earth and man. They are offering light. They are offering these disciplines.

They are offering kinesthetic sensibility, the balance of body in space. And they are offering the refined surface.

They are reminding us, and inviting us to the primordial dance; they are offering us the dance of time in animacy. These disciplines they offer as well.

Deeply, they offer us the dance.

They offer us their ink in our electronic flow. They offer us their brush in our modifying circuits. They offer us their paper in our glass.

Lo -- if they could have had our magnetic field!

Electromagnetic radiance -- light -- mind.

Perhaps, most deeply, they offer us harmony and balance of the meaningful, significant act; intercourse between poet and the swift travelling insight. In-sight focused out.

They offer us mastery and form. And egos synthesized with culture. And eyes as clear as crystal.

And they offer us an accessible body of philosophy, literature, and practice.

Who will accept their offering?

"Calligraphy originates in nature. With nature Yin and Yang are born, with Yin and Yang forces emerge. From the setting down of the brush and the transmission of power through it comes

the beauty of the muscle and skin in each brushstroke."

from The Nine Faces, an essay attributed to Ts'ai Yung (132-192 A.D.)

"The written word is not merely a word; it is an image.

"Calligraphy is based on set brush formulas. A beginner learns the form-type by imitation; as the process of repeated enactment brings him closer and closer to a total mastery of the form, he begins to express himself through it.

"Writing is a physical act. Each performance is different and unique. Throughout the creation of a character there are accidents and chance happenings -- a continuing interaction between the brush, the ink, the paper, and the calligrapher -- all of which calls for quick adjustment and change of plans."

on a wall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at the entranceway to an exhibition of ancient Chinese calligraphy.